

Cuba Mission Of Lost Fliers Was 'Private'

By Stanley Meisler

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Government sources indicated today that fliers Robert Thompson and Robert Swanner were on a private mission—not an official one—when they disappeared over Cuba in December, 1961.

That would explain why the families of the missing men, who told friends they were going on a leaflet-dropping flight, have received no Government benefits.

The Central Intelligence Agency reportedly has denied to Sen. George Smathers (D-Fla.) that the men had been in its employ.

Smathers and two other members of Congress have been asked by the families for some help, at least for Social Security benefits. But the Congressmen have been unable to determine that the families are eligible for these benefits.

The fliers have not been receiving any regular compensation from private sources, either. This is their plight apart from that of the widows of four Americans shot down over Cuba while flying B-26 bombers in the Bay of Pigs invasion in April, 1961.

The widows receive regular checks from a trust fund set up by the Double Check Corp. of Miami.

The facts surrounding the Thompson and Swanner case are meager and confused, but the picture emerges:

Thompson, 23, of Charleston, S.C., and Swanner, 26, of Miami, left Fort Lauderdale, Fla., on Dec. 14, 1961, in a twin-engine private plane. Frank Fiorini of Miami accompanied them.

Fiorini said the two were on a leaflet-dropping mission, and he accompanied them to their first stop, a secret base in the Bahamas.

Thompson, who had made such flights before, had a letter from the State Department forbidding him to fly over Cuba again.

"The men were well paid for what they were doing," Fiorini said.

According to Fiorini, Thompson and Swanner left the Bahamas base and headed for the Cuban city of Matanzas where they were to drop leaflets and return. But they never came back.

They were last seen over Matanzas on Dec. 16, 1961.

For 15 months, the wives of Thompson and Swanner have been trying to collect private insurance and Social Security benefits. An aide in Smathers' office said the problem is compounded by the difficulty of proving whether the two men are dead or alive.